

## IDPC Advocacy Note

Launching the Debate:  
The OAS Reports on Hemispheric Drug Policy

July 2013

Following the release of the OAS Report, “The Drug Problem in the Americas,” IDPC published an analysis of it written by Lisa Sánchez, Drug Policy Coordinator for Mexico Unido Contra la Delinuencia and Transform Drug Policy Foundation, which can be found [here](#).<sup>1</sup> This advocacy note is intended to complement that analysis with a specific focus on opportunities for advocacy presented by the OAS reports. It was primarily written by Coletta A. Youngers with inputs from Donald MacPherson, Pien Metaal, Martin Jelsma, Steve Rolles, Lisa Sánchez, John Walsh and Zara Snapp, who wrote the section on the scenarios report.

## Introduction

In April 2012, most of the hemisphere’s presidents gathered at the Summit of the Americas in Cartagena, Colombia and held a closed-door meeting where drug policy was the only topic discussed. Following that meeting, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos announced that the Organisation of American States (OAS) was being tasked to analyse the results of hemispheric drug policies and to “*explore new approaches to strengthen this struggle and become more effective*”.<sup>2</sup> Thus began a one year process led by OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza, with the support of OAS staff from the Secretariat for Multidimensional Security and the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD), as well as a range of independent experts. On May 17, 2013, the OAS presented the final products: an analytical report, [The Drug Problem in the Americas](#),<sup>3</sup> and the result of a scenario planning exercise, [Scenarios for the Drug Problem in the Americas, 2013-2025](#).<sup>4</sup> The analytical report is based upon six studies (now presented as annexes) and is composed of ten chapters, concluding with a chapter on OAS “contributions to the debate” that contains some of the most far-reaching policy alternatives suggested. It is important to note that, according to the OAS, neither of the reports is intended to provide policy recommendations per se, but rather to inform decision-making on drug policies.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://idpc.net/es/blog/2013/05/el-problema-de-las-drogas-en-las-americas-analisis-del-informe-de-la-organizacion-de-estados-americanos>

<sup>2</sup> As described by the Chair of the Sixth Summit of the Americas, Juan Manuel Santos, President of Colombia, on April 15, 2012

<sup>3</sup> See: [http://www.oas.org/en/media\\_center/press\\_release.asp?sCodigo=E-194/13](http://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-194/13)

<sup>4</sup> See: [http://www.oas.org/en/media\\_center/press\\_release.asp?sCodigo=E-194/13](http://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-194/13)

<sup>5</sup> The chapters in the analytical report cover: 1) the drug problem, 2) health, 3) crop cultivation, 4) drug production, 5) distribution and transit, 6) drug sales, 7) drug use, 8) drugs, crime and violence, 9) legal and regulatory alternatives and 10) contributing to the launch of a new dialogue

The second report includes a set of scenarios about what could happen in the future. The exercise was led by two non-governmental organisations, Reos Partners and the *Centro de Lierazgo y Gestión*, based in Canada and Colombia respectively. They pulled together a team of experts from a variety of fields which produced a set of four scenarios on the possible evolution of the current situation. Drawing on the analytical report and 75 in-depth interviews with international experts, the scenarios are intended to be relevant, challenging, credible and clear. The four scenarios – entitled *Together*, *Pathways*, *Resilience* and *Disruption* – have the dual objective of promoting debate and dialogue among government officials and others relevant actors and supporting the design and implementation of alternative policies and strategies. While they represent four different narratives, the scenarios are not mutually exclusive and are intended to be read together.

This advocacy note is not intended to provide a thorough analysis or critique of the content of the two reports presented by the OAS, which together with the annexes referred to above cover hundreds and hundreds of pages. Rather, the purpose here is to highlight some of the key points presented in the two reports that, in the view of the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), especially merit further debate and discussion.<sup>6</sup> The challenge for governments, civil society groups and citizens across the hemisphere is to use the report as a tool for debating present drug policies and ultimately crafting alternative approaches that are both more humane and effective.

## The Analytical Report, “The Drug Problem in the Americas”

The OAS report is a ground-breaking effort for such an institution; unfortunately, the title of the report itself somewhat obscures this fact. In referring to the “drug problem” the report’s title comes off as simplistic, attempting to capture a range of complex issues in one simple phrase and without ever defining “the problem.” In fact, the OAS study presents a more sophisticated analysis than the title implies. It begins from the premise that there is not one problem related to drugs but rather multiple issues and that each country faces a different set of challenges that necessitate inter-related but distinct policy solutions.

Key points presented in the analytical report that merit further debate are elaborated below.

### **The OAS report recognises the “economic and social costs associated with drug control laws currently in place” (p. 6)**

Not surprisingly, throughout the report are descriptions of the harm caused by drug production, trafficking and use. At the same time, numerous sections of the report note with welcome candour ***the harms caused or exacerbated by drug policy itself***. It also at times offers an approach to drug policy that draws on pragmatic “harm reduction” strategies for addressing drug dependency – in other words, the need to mitigate the harms of present policies – although without specifically using that language (more explanation on this point is provided below). For example, in a discussion of drugs and development, the report highlights that “the great challenge is to posit State policy alternatives to address the drug problem that are least detrimental to society and development” (p. 25), and warns of the pernicious consequences of criminalising large swathes of the population. The question is also posed, “to what extent current policies, geared to punishment and criminalization, trigger more harm than they prevent” (p. 25). In addition, at

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<sup>6</sup> This advocacy note is also arguably one-sided, focusing on references to drug policy reforms promoted by IDPC and its member organisations. Those with different points of view will no doubt read the report differently.

different points in the text, the report recognises that prohibitionist policies create an illegal economy which generates crime, violence, and corruption (see, for example, p. 21). In other words, the analytical report (and the annex on Drugs and Security) acknowledges, at least indirectly, the negative effects created by illegal markets, particularly with regards to insecurity and violence. Recognising that there are harms caused by both drug use and by drug policies is the first step towards a more rational discussion of more effective approaches.

### **Drug use should be addressed from a public health perspective**

A thorough reading of the report leads to the conclusion that there is a need to rethink the present drug control paradigm from a public health perspective. Throughout the report are references to the need to treat drug dependence as a public health issue. The report also clearly states that “Most people in the world do not use drugs, and of those who experiment with drug use, only a small number will continue using them regularly; of these, only a fraction will develop harmful patterns of use and dependence (p. 63)”, an acknowledgement of fundamental realities that is typically lacking in official documents. With regard to treatment and prevention programmes, the report also provides a coherent critique of their limited (or, in some cases, non-existent) coverage, the lack of integration, coercive treatment approaches and potential for human rights abuses. The report also acknowledges a range of environmental risk factors – including family situation, school, peers, and social status, among others – that challenge the notion that individuals exercise complete control over their choices and behaviours.

However, a major shortcoming is that only one mention of “harm reduction”, in the introduction, can be found in the analytical report and annexes. There are references to some harm reduction efforts – such as Canada’s supervised injection site, needle and syringe programmes, and opioid substitution therapy – but without referring to them as harm reduction efforts. Disturbingly absent is any discussion of the basic concept of harm reduction: policies, programmes and practices that aim primarily to reduce the adverse health, social and economic consequences of the use of legal and illegal psychoactive drugs without necessarily reducing drug consumption.<sup>7</sup> This concept – at the core of UNODC, UNAIDS and WHO best practice guidance<sup>8</sup> – recognises that despite the negative consequences associated with drug use (and given the lack of evidence around effective prevention and some treatment programmes, as well as extremely limited access to treatment services in Latin America), many people will be unwilling or unable to stop using drugs. Harm reduction interventions are low-cost, highly effective and internationally recognised measures that protect the health and human rights of people who use drugs.

The lack of a meaningful discussion of the lessons learned and evidence gathered from effective harm reduction programmes around the world is among the analytical report’s greatest shortcomings. In contrast, harm reduction is mentioned in the scenarios report over 30 times in various contexts, a box is dedicated to it (Scenarios Report, pp. 43-44) and the concept is discussed extensively in the Resilience scenario. The scenarios report goes further than the more traditional meaning of the term (usually linked to public health measures), highlighting its potential broader meaning and its relevance to the policy debate, stating: “the

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<sup>7</sup> This is the definition of harm reduction used by Harm Reduction International

<sup>8</sup> World Health Organisation, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime & Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (2013), *WHO, UNODC, UNAIDS Technical Guide to set targets for universal access to HIV prevention, treatment and care for injecting drug users, 2012 revision* (Geneva: World Health Organisation), <http://idpc.net/publications/2013/01/who-unodc-unaid-technical-guide-for-countries-to-set-targets-for-universal-access-to-hiv-prevention-treatment-and-care-for-injecting-drug-users-2012-revision>

term 'harm reduction' is also used to refer to changes in policy priorities towards reducing the harms related to the illicit market and drug law enforcement, such as drug-related violence, corruption, or environmental damage, without necessarily reducing the extent of the market" (Scenarios Report, p. 15). The dramatically different treatment given to the harm reduction issue in the analytical and scenarios reports begs the question as to whether or not the former was more susceptible to political pressures.

**"Decriminalization of drug use needs to be considered as a core element in any public health strategy" (p.103)**

A logical conclusion of implementing a public health approach is to decriminalise drug consumption and the carrying of small amounts of drugs for that purpose. The scenarios report defines decriminalisation as: "Eliminating criminal penalties for the unauthorized consumption and possession (typically of amounts small enough to be used for personal use only) of a controlled substance. In a decriminalized system, the act no longer results in criminal sanctions like incarceration, but administrative sanctions may still apply in some jurisdictions – for example, fines or community service, or merely a summons or citation. In some places use and possession for personal use cease to be a punishable offense or infraction altogether, so no sanction, criminal or administrative, is applied at all" (Scenarios Report, p. 13).

As noted, the report acknowledges that the vast majority of people who use drugs are recreational users who cause no harm to themselves, their families or their communities. Those who are dependent on drugs should be assisted through the public health sector, rather than locking them up in prison or making their prospects more difficult with the stigma of a criminal record. The report asserts: "National, hemispheric, and international drug policies have gradually come to view addiction as a chronic and recurrent illness requiring a health oriented approach involving a wide range of interventions. The fundamental change in perspective has been to shift from viewing drug users as criminals or accomplices of drug-traffickers to seeing them as victims and chronic addicts" (p. 103). Some of the language used in the report is problematic, particularly the somewhat derogatory way in which people dependent on drugs tend to be described, and the failure to recognise that many people freely choose to use drugs and have positive experiences when doing so. Nonetheless, the decriminalisation of drug use is one of the strongest policy options put forward in the report. This should help support the efforts of those countries, such as Argentina where legislation is pending to decriminalise the possession of small amounts of drugs for personal use, and should send a wake-up call to countries such as the United States that continue to put inordinate numbers of people behind bars for simple drug use or possession.

**Drug laws are often unfair: Those guilty of lesser drug offenses are being incarcerated for disproportionately long periods of time**

"It is important to determine", according to the analytical report, "whether current legislation and sentencing guidelines tend to punish the less guilty" (p. 60). The report provides an interesting analysis of how drug use and trafficking tends to affect the most marginalised segments of the population. It also notes that "sentences for drug dealing are sometimes severe, even longer than sentences for serious acts of violence" (p. 60). It highlights the tendency to incarcerate petty criminals and points to the growing phenomenon of the "feminization of drug crimes"; in some countries up to 70 per cent of women in jail are there on drug charges. This puts a very high burden on criminal justice systems, has led to massive prison overcrowding and causes suffering to individuals, families and communities. Moreover, targeting those at the bottom of the drug trafficking chain with disproportionate sentences also undermines respect for the law. In response, the report suggests consideration of drug law reform to ensure proportionate penalties

according to the role, power, and reach of people involved in the trafficking chain, as well as any mitigating circumstances such as socio-economic vulnerability.

The report also recommends alternatives to incarceration for low-level drug offenders. However, there is the danger of seeing US-modelled drug courts – in which people dependent on drugs remain in the criminal justice system but are put into mandatory treatment rather than prison – as an effective alternative to incarceration.<sup>9</sup> As stated clearly in the report, drug use or carrying small amounts of drugs for personal consumption should be decriminalised. Yet it is precisely people who use drugs – not those who have committed other “crimes” – who are brought into the US drug court system. Promoting this model in Latin America could lead to a major setback in drug law reforms. The concept of alternatives to incarceration is only a valuable principle when applied to those who would otherwise face imprisonment – most often those accused of more serious drug trafficking offenses or crimes such as theft or burglary committed to finance drug dependence (as opposed to those charged only with drug possession for personal use). In these cases, more effective (and humane) alternatives to incarceration include access to evidence-based drug dependence treatment programmes, community service, education and employment training opportunities, and other programmes to promote social reintegration and inclusion.

**Citizen insecurity is primarily the result of poverty and marginalisation; drug markets and violence are not intrinsically linked**

The report recognises that multiple factors contribute to citizen insecurity and that it is difficult to establish causal relationships between citizen insecurity, violence and the drug trade. Bluntly put, there is no necessary or inherent connection between drug markets and violence. Following this logic could lead to the conclusion that popular fears that less punitive enforcement policies or drug law reforms could increase citizen insecurity and drug-related violence are not necessarily grounded in reality. The annex on drugs and security states that the fundamental causes of such insecurity are not drugs themselves, but rather social conditions generated by poverty and marginalisation. Toward that end, the analytical report concludes that reducing violence and insecurity related to the drug trade “requires mitigating that vulnerability through comprehensive action by both the State and civil society to enhance education, employment, equal opportunities, and urban living conditions” (p. 102). The analytical report also points out that “arms trafficking has become one of the main problems for citizen security in the region” (p. 77), an issue which is increasingly being put forward in hemispheric drug policy debates. Finally, the report underscores the extent to which impunity, corruption, weak institutions and absence of the rule of law encourage violence (p. 102). The analysis underscores two important points: 1) the need for more research on the links between drugs, crime and violence; and 2) institutional reform and institution-building are fundamental to mitigating the impact of drug trafficking and related violence. Yet these are medium to long-term solutions. In the short-term, viable strategies to reduce crime and violence are needed to give governments the space they need to pursue a longer-term reform agenda. One option, not discussed in the analytical report but which constitutes an important element in the “*Together*” scenario, is focused-deterrence and selective targeting strategies, intended to reduce the violence associated with the drug market rather than the scale of the drug market per se.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For additional information, see: Guzman, D.E. (May 2012), *IDPC Briefing Paper – Drug courts: Scope and challenges of an alternative to incarceration* (London: International Drug Policy Consortium), <http://idpc.net/publications/2012/07/idpc-briefing-paper-drug-courts>

<sup>10</sup> For additional information, see IDPC’s publications on Modernising drug law enforcement: <http://idpc.net/policy-advocacy/special-projects/modernising-drug-law-enforcement>

### **A chapter of the report, a scenario and one of the annexes are dedicated to legal and regulatory alternatives**

Several chapters of the report – such as those on cultivation, production and distribution – read like the UNODC’s annual *World Drug Report* or the US State Department’s *International Drug Control Strategy Report*. While an interesting argument can be found here or there, most of the information provided is compiled from other readily available sources. In contrast, the chapter in the analytical report, the annex on legal and regulatory alternatives and the “*Pathways*” scenario break new ground.<sup>11</sup> They cover a lot of material, reviewing key terminology and the potential impact of the decriminalisation of personal possession and use, legalisation and regulation. The OAS recognises that there are many possible approaches to making drugs legal. It provides examples of numerous case studies of policies that move in the direction of regulation, such as coffee shops in the Netherlands, cannabis social clubs in Spain, marijuana legal regulation initiatives in the US states of Washington and Colorado, and regulation of novel psychoactive substances in New Zealand.

However, the presentation of the potential harms of enforcing prohibition as a “trade off” against the harms of illicit drug use sets up a false dichotomy based on the dubious assumption that prohibition is itself effective at reducing drug use and related harms. Similarly, some unfounded assumptions can be seen in the list of potential positives and negatives of implementing a regulatory framework, such as the idea that such a model will inevitably lead to increased use, without serious discussion of how regulatory interventions might positively shape using behaviours (though some examples of how that has worked with alcohol are provided). In short, the chapter may raise more questions than answers. However, it is a useful and generally balanced overview of the issues related to implementing legal, regulated drug markets. The fact that the discussion is included in an official report from an inter-government agency multilateral is a major step forward.

Of particular significance, the final chapter of the report underscores the value of assessing “existing signals and trends that lead toward the decriminalization or legalization of the production, sale and use of marijuana”, noting that, “Sooner or later decisions in this area will need to be taken” (p. 104). In that sense, the report recognises that some jurisdictions have already moved in the direction of creating legal, regulated cannabis markets – such as allowing for cultivation for personal use via cannabis clubs as in Spain, legal cannabis markets being put in place in the US states of Colorado and Washington and those recently approved by the government of Uruguay. In short, the OAS report implies that sooner or later, the international drug control system will need to adapt to this new reality.

### **The OAS report debunks the myth of a “one-size-fits-all” approach to drug policy**

“We conclude”, states Secretary General Insulza in his introduction, that “the drug problem needs to be dealt with in a flexible, differentiated fashion, wherein countries adopt an approach tailored to the particular ways in which they are affected” (p. 8). Similarly, the last chapter of the report states, “The drug problem requires a flexible approach, with countries adopting tailored approaches that reflect individual concerns” (p. 104). In short, the OAS reports emphasises that each country faces differing challenges stemming from cultivation, production, transit and consumption – and that different issues necessitate different solutions. The OAS calls for a multi-faceted approach and flexibility to allow for incorporating new evidence to enhance

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<sup>11</sup> The only previous example that IDPC has identified is the 1997 World Drug Report (the annual report by what is now the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC) which covers legalisation issues

policy effectiveness. This is a welcome change from the tendency to develop laundry lists of programmes and policies that individual countries are expected to implement. Also of significance, the report clearly states, “certain drugs are more harmful than others” (p. 100), another welcome change from the approach embraced in the international drug control conventions which treats all controlled drugs as equally dangerous.

### **The report calls for international drug law reform, opening the door to convention reform**

Following on the call for flexibility, the report concludes with a reference to international drug law reform. Perhaps the most important line in the entire report can be found on the last page: “Greater flexibility could lead to the possibility of amending domestic legislation or *promoting changes to international law*” (p. 104, emphasis added). Such changes may be necessary given the need for flexibility and allowing “parties to explore drug policy options that take into consideration their own specific practices and traditions” (p. 104). This is also where there is the direct reference to the issue of creating legal, regulated markets for cannabis, which presently falls outside the confines of the existing international drug conventions. Numerous countries, including the United States and the Russian Federation, vociferously oppose any changes to the conventions as they stand – fearing that even minor efforts, such as Bolivia’s attempt to change the status of the coca leaf in the international accords – could open a ‘Pandora’s Box’ of reform initiatives. Yet since the 2009 UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on Drugs, cracks in the ‘Vienna consensus’ (which forms the basis of the international drug control conventions) have been abundantly clear. Now, for the first time, a regional multilateral organisation has raised the issue of reform of those conventions, a point that may be particularly important in light of the upcoming debates to be held at the next UNGASS on drugs in 2016.

## **Scenarios for the Drug Problem in the Americas, 2013 – 2025**

In many ways, the OAS scenarios report provides an even more pioneering tool for debating policies and informing decision-making processes. The scenarios are neither descriptions of the current situation nor recommendations, but rather are stories about what is possible – what could happen – and thus provide a common framework for holding dialogues with governmental and non-governmental actors at the local, national and international level about the challenges, opportunities, options and next steps around drugs and drug policy. They are a set of four different but not mutually exclusive narratives that are intended to be read together.<sup>13</sup>

***The scenario “Together”<sup>14</sup> views the drug problem as part of the insecurity issue, as weak institutions are unable to control the power of organised crime and the violence created by it. The proposed response is to strengthen judicial and public safety institutions, using professionalisation, partnerships with citizens and improved international cooperation.***

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<sup>13</sup> For more information on the methodology of the scenario planning exercise, see Kahane, A. (2012), *Transformative Scenario Planning* (Reos Partners), available on Amazon

<sup>14</sup> The description of each scenario is from a slide presentation by Adam Kahane at the meeting of the International Society for the Study of Drug Policy (ISSDP) in Bogota, Colombia on 17 May 2013

The opportunities in this scenario are increased security, credibility of state institutions and global partnerships, but the challenges include deeply entrenched interests, traditionally weak international cooperation and the well-known balloon effect of organised criminal activities.

This scenario reflects much of the current status quo – it is focused on the assumption that the problem is not the present policies but how they are implemented – and focuses on increasing state capacity over building new citizen-focused and human rights-oriented security policies. It carries the risk of perpetuating resource displacement from health and social expenditures to law enforcement. It could also lead to increased militarisation of countries in the name of professionalising security agencies and thus might result in increased violations of human rights.

***The “Pathways” scenario posits that controlling drugs through criminal sanctions (including incarceration) causes too much harm to communities and thus the response is to explore and learn from alternative and regulatory frameworks, beginning with cannabis.***

This scenario presents the opportunity to develop better drug policies through experimentation, using the reallocation of resources from controlling drugs with punitive enforcement; the prevention and treatment of drug dependency; and the exploration of legal regulation of drug markets as a way of shrinking some criminal markets. The potential challenges come from managing the risks related to experimentation in transitioning from criminal to regulated markets, the inter-governmental tensions resulting from differences in legal regimes across jurisdictions, and the process of reforming entrenched international legal systems.

“Pathways,” in many ways a ground-breaking scenario (which has never been put forth by a multilateral organisation), provides an acknowledgement of the value of experimenting with different legal regimes in order to better understand drug policy and address drug issues with a more pragmatic health-based approach. This scenario advocates a harm reduction approach to mitigate the harms caused by both drugs and current drug policies. It explores a realignment of resource allocation in order to prioritise the needs of the community and addresses organised crime at the root: reducing profits. While there are risks related to any experimentation, from the perspective of the drug policy reform community, this scenario opens the space for countries to legitimately begin exploring regulatory alternatives.

***“Resilience” sees the drug problem as a manifestation of deep social and economic dysfunctions that lead to violence. Key to changing that is strengthening communities, improving public safety and promoting health, education and employment with the help of governments, business and civil society.***

This creates an opportunity for inclusivity, reduced violence and healthier communities that take an active role in fighting crime. This scenario reinforces some of the arguments presented in the analytical report that drug dependence is not the problem in and of itself, but rather a manifestation or a symptom of other social dysfunctions. It posits the need to strengthen the social fabric in order to address the real issues at the root of the drug issue, such as poverty, social exclusion, lack of educational and employment opportunities, conflict, etc. It also reinforces the need for public health and harm reduction approaches and the decriminalisation of drug use. The challenges for this scenario are many, including insufficient resources and a long lag time between beginning programmes and seeing results related to decreased “drug-war” related violence.



While the concerns and policies proposed in this scenario ring true, they are less focused on the drug policy issue and instead highlight the strong need for greater social services throughout the Americas; in other words, this scenario runs the risk of confusing drug policies with social policies more broadly. However, despite stating that the scenario could lead to a shift away from repressive penalties, it fails to offer policy options for dealing with the harm generated by present policies with regards to drug production and trafficking.

***In the “Disruption” scenario, the drug problem is understood as a matter of an unfair and unbearable distribution of the harms and costs caused by drug trafficking and drug enforcement policies, affecting disproportionately producer and transit countries. It explores the possibility of some countries ceasing to enforce present drug policies and forming a “pact” with criminal groups to effectively turn a blind eye to drug production and transit.***

While this might provide opportunities at the national level for reducing violence and freeing up resources now being spent on enforcement and security, challenges include the expansion of drug markets and profits and the possible capture of States by criminal organisations. Conflicts over enforcement of international treaties are likely to occur.

This scenario gives an uneasy sense that some countries might ‘give up’. While this option does honour the sovereignty of each country, it does not proactively seek policy alternatives and instead relies on reducing priority on or abandoning altogether the enforcement policies that form the basis for the present drug control paradigm. It might be a pragmatic approach from the point of view of some governments, but it does not create momentum for change to the wider structural challenges in the international drug control system.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza concludes his introduction to the analytical report stating: “This report, does not, therefore, provide a conclusion but rather the start of a long-awaited discussion” (p. 9). Shortly after its release, that discussion began in the [annual OAS General Assembly meeting](#),<sup>15</sup> which brought together the hemisphere’s foreign ministers in Antigua, Guatemala from 4 to 6 June 2013. At the suggestion of the Guatemalan government, for the first time drug policy was the thematic focus of a General Assembly meeting. The [final declaration](#)<sup>16</sup> from the Antigua meeting calls for countries to initiate a multi-layered process of consultation on drug policy issues in a variety of national and regional forums,<sup>17</sup> taking into account the OAS studies just described, and concludes by entrusting the OAS Permanent Council to call for a Special Session of the OAS General Assembly in 2014 to discuss drug policy. The process laid out in Antigua ensures that drug policy will remain at the top of the hemispheric agenda for the foreseeable future and provides greater opportunity for Latin American countries to influence the 2016 UNGASS.

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<sup>15</sup> See: <http://www.oas.org/en/43ga/>

<sup>16</sup> See: [http://www.oas.org/en/media\\_center/press\\_release.asp?sCodigo=S-010](http://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=S-010)

<sup>17</sup> These include meetings at the national level; in regional multidisciplinary groups; the next bi-annual meeting of the OAS’s Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD) which will take place in Colombia in December 2013; in the Meeting of Ministers Responsible for Public Security in the Americas, also to be held in Colombia in November 2013; and in other specialised meetings coordinated by the OAS General Secretariat

In the aftermath of the reports' release, Secretary General Insulza has begun visiting countries to present the reports' findings. The governments of a handful of Latin American countries – such as Guatemala, Colombia and Uruguay – have expressed interest in using the reports as a tool for promoting national discussions on drug policy issues. However, left to governmental initiative alone, the momentum built upon the release of the OAS reports could easily fizzle out.

**Civil society organisations have a very important role to play in ensuring that the reports promote national, regional and international debate on how to craft a more humane, human rights-centred approach to drugs and drug policy.**

Towards that end, IDPC members and others advocating for drug policy reforms could seek to:

- **Organise local and national forums to debate the OAS drug policy reports.**
- **Engage other civil society actors in drug policy discussions, including human rights organisations and representatives of community-based groups and social movements.**
- **Generate media coverage of the OAS reports and drug policy debates more generally.**
- **Engage with local and national government officials to discuss the reports and in particular the issues highlighted in this advocacy note, as well as how those issues can be incorporated into the agenda of the 2016 UNGASS on drugs.**
- **Participate in the regional forums laid out in the Antigua declaration, including the Meeting of Ministers Responsible for Public Security in the Americas to be held in Medellín, Colombia in November 2013 and the next bi-annual meeting of the OAS's Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD), which will also take place in Colombia in December 2013.**
- **To facilitate such participation, NGOs that do not already have it should apply for OAS and ECOSOC observer status and join the Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs (VNGOC).<sup>18</sup>**

The International Drug Policy Consortium is a global network of non-government organisations and professional networks that specialise in issues related to illegal drug production and use. The Consortium aims to promote objective and open debate on the effectiveness, direction and content of drug policies at national and international level, and supports evidence-based policies that are effective in reducing drug-related harm. It produces briefing papers, disseminates the reports of its member organisations, and offers expert consultancy services to policy makers and officials around the world.

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<sup>18</sup> For more information about becoming a member of the VNGOC, please visit: <http://vngoc.org/>